

Transylvania County Natural Area Inventory

TOXAWAY RIVER HEADWATERS Significant Natural Heritage Area

Site Significance: State
Quadrangle: Lake Toxaway

Size: 1,285 acres (1209 in primary
area, 76 in secondary areas)
Ownership: Private

SIGNIFICANT FEATURES: Toxaway River Headwaters is an area dominated by dome-like mountains with high cliff faces and forested slopes dissected by steep rocky ravines. The site contains numerous high-quality natural communities, including excellent examples of High Elevation Seeps, Montane Acidic Cliffs, Spray Cliffs, and mature upland forest and cove communities. Several rare plant, animal, bryophyte, and lichen species are known from the site. Rare plant populations include one of the largest populations of pink-shell azalea (*Rhododendron vaseyi*) in the region along with populations of Biltmore sedge (*Carex biltmoreana*), red turtlehead (*Chelone obliqua*), rock-fir clubmoss (*Huperzia porophila*), and granite dome bluet (*Houstonia longifolia* var. *glabra*). The site provides excellent wildlife habitat, and three rare animal species are known from the site. Peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) have maintained a successful aerie on the cliffs of Panthertail Mountain for a number of years. Timber rattlesnakes (*Crotalus horridus*) have been observed here, and green salamanders (*Aneides aeneus*) were historically reported as well. Perhaps the most significant feature of the site are the rare non-vascular species and the special habitats in which they are found. These include a population of rock gnome lichen (*Gymnoderma lineare*) and one of the few occurrences of sword moss (*Bryoxiphium norvegicum*) in the state.

LANDSCAPE RELATIONSHIPS: The site is well-connected to surrounding intact natural areas and lies immediately to the east of Panthertown Valley and south of Big Pisgah Mountain/Dismal Falls. The site encompasses the headwaters of the Toxaway River, adjacent slopes and cliffs, and a small portion of the upper Tuckaseegee River drainage as well. The Nantahala National Forest adjoins the site to the north and west along the Transylvania-Jackson County border. Lake Toxaway is east of the site, and residential development on Ravenrock Mountain borders the site to the south-southeast. Low density residential areas, driveways, and Cold Mountain Road are included in the site's secondary areas.

SITE DESCRIPTION: The Toxaway River Headwaters lies between Cold Mountain, Panthertail Mountain, and Ravenrock Mountain in western Transylvania County. All of these mountains are characterized by steep cliffs with forested terraces sandwiched in between and on the gentle lower slopes. Cold and Pathertail mountains are formed from granitic domes and their structure and vegetation is clearly influenced by the underlying rock core. Cold Mountain is a rounded dome and has a broad, relatively flat summit and steep cliff. Panthertail Mountain is elongated, with a long ridge running east-west and a much more keeled summit. Ravenrock Mountain has similar steep, rocky topography. Deep ravines with rocky cliffs dissect the slopes of these mountains. The Toxaway River flows through the middle of the site down a narrow rocky ravine, lined with cliffs and underlain by bedrock. It flows over several waterfalls before it